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ABSTRACT

The curious association between romance and adverse circumstances is based on an extension of emotional attribution theory, which postulates that romantic notions are evoked when nonspecific physiological arousal is attributed to another person or to an interpersonal relationship. Data from a survey on stressful life events was examined to ascertain if there was evidence of the predicted association between the occurrence of stressful life events and falling in love. Subjects were 461 adults representing four cultural/residential groups, i.e., Anglos, Mexican Americans, Mexicans living in Texas but raised in Mexico, and Mexicans raised and living in Mexico. Respondents reported whether they had experienced any of 110 life-events within a 12-month span. Those entering love relationships experienced a greater number of life events than those who did not. Anglos were also more likely to have experienced a large number of life events. (Author/HLM)

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LIFE STRESSORS AND ROMANTIC AFFILIATION

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LIFE STRESSORS AND ROMANTIC AFFILIATION

What is romantic about war times? Why would Cicero advise men to take their would-be lovers to the gladiatorial contests? Psychologists are now investigating the strange phenomena of increased romantic attractiveness under aversive circumstances.

In a justly famous study, Dutton and Aron (1974) rigged a situation in which an attractive female researcher approached men to fill out a questionnaire while they were crossing a long, narrow, rickety bridge which swayed and wobbled over a very steep chasm. The men were presumed to be under conditions of fear, greater fear at least than for subjects in the control condition, who were approached on a sturdier, lower bridge upstream. The interviewer offered to explain the purpose of her questionnaire in greater detail when she had more time, and to this end she left her phone number with each subject. Thirty percent of the men on the rickety bridge phoned her later, while only 6% of the control subjects did so.

The prevailing theoretical view of this curious association between romance and adverse circumstances is based on Walster's (1971) extension of Schachter's (Schachter & Singer, 1962) emotional attribution theory. According to this formulation, romantic emotions are evoked when nonspecific physiological arousal is attributed to another person or to an interpersonal relationship. That is, "love" is attributed to oneself when physiological arousal is experienced in a situation appropriate to romantic interpretation. In the absence of insight into the true source of the arousal, it might be mislabelled. Love is a misattribution, or, as Walster has more gently put it, "adrenaline makes the heart grow fonder."

One implication of this hypothesis is that people would be more apt to fall in love during times of crisis in their lives -- not only during wars, but during unemployment, following the death of someone close, or during other life changes likely to induce stress. Most of the data relating arousal and romantic attraction have described the effects of acute, experimentally-induced stress on undergraduate students. We decided to test the generality of the relationship by examining data on the effects of naturally-occurring stress in the general population. Accordingly, we examined data from an existing survey on stressful life events to see if there was evidence of the predicted association between the occurrence of stressful events and falling in love. The data were from a project conducted by Drs. Richard Hough and Diane Fairbank.

Method

Subjects

The sample for this project was drawn from the twin cities of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, having a total population of approximately 800,000 at the time of sampling. Simple random sampling methods were employed in El Paso, utilizing a sampling frame developed from listings obtained from the El Paso City Directory and the City Planning Department. Adequate listing and maps were unavailable in Juarez. Therefore, aerial photographs were taken to generate a set of residential clusters. Simple random sampling identified clusters which were then mapped, and particular households within the cluster were randomly selected. Within each household in both El Paso and Juarez, eligible adults between the ages of 21 and 60 were listed and the respondent was randomly selected utilizing the Kish procedure.

The final sample was composed of 461 respondents representing four cultural/residential groups. Anglos (n=131), Mexican-Americans (n=108), Mexicans in El Paso who were raised in Mexico (n=89), and Mexicans in Juarez who were raised in Mexico (n=133). The interview was given in either Spanish or English,

depending on respondent's preference. Both male and female interviewers from El Paso and Juarez conducted the survey. A total of 180 males and 281 females were interviewed.

Life Event Measures

Respondents reported whether they had experienced any of 110 events within the previous 12 months. In addition, events which had occured to spouse, children and significant others were recorded. The event list was developed by Hough and Fairbank to include a broad range of occurences which were likely to require adjustment on the part of the respondent. These events covered areas of school, work, love and marriage, having children, family life, change of residence, crime and legal matters, finances, social life and recreation, church activities, and health of friends and family.

Although the survey was designed to investigate the association of life events and illness in this population, the extensive life event list provided an opportunity to examine the hypothesis that stress is related to romantic involvement in a randomly sampled adult community population. More specifically, we predicted that those persons who reported becoming romantically involved over the past year would also report a larger number of life events in other life areas. We used the number of life events experienced as a gross indicator of the amount of stress that the person experienced during the year. Although the cross-sectional nature of this design does not allow causal inference, the association between romantic involvement and life events would provide additional support for the hypothesis that stress facilitates falling in love. Furthermore, evidence for a relationship between stress and love, when considering naturally-occurring romantic involvements in an adult community sample, would suggest the importance of this process in "real-world" relationships.

Two major indices were created from the Life Events data set to examine our hypothesis. The first was an index of romantic involvement which divided the sample into 2 groups: those persons who had reported entering a love relationship in the previous 12 months and those who had not. Events which were considered as entrances into love relationships included: becoming engaged, getting married, entering a love affair while not married, living together without getting married, and having an extramarital affair.

The second index was the total number of other life events which were reported, excluding those which influenced romantic involvement for reasons other than inducing stress (e.g., "separating," or "getting a divorce"). A total of 200 life events were included in this index.

Results and Discussion

An initial t-test, comparing mean number of life events experienced by persons entering love relationships with persons who did not, supported the stress-love hypothesis. Those entering love relationships experienced a greater number of life events ($\bar{X}$=7.32, n=38) than those who did not ($\bar{X}$=5.09, n=423) (t=3.32, p=.001).

A second test of the hypothesis was made by examining the relationship of romantic affiliation to positive versus negative life events. Assuming that positive life events do not create as much stress or arousal as negative life events, the relationship of romantic involvement to positive events should be weaker than for negative events. Events were selected from the total life events index which would in most cases be considered positive (i.e., financial improvement, promoted at work, took a vacation). A t-test comparing groups on this positive event index revealed only a marginal trend (t=1.75, p=.08) for persons entering love relationships to experience more positive events ($\bar{X}$=1.82) than those who did not ($\bar{X}$=1.37). A similar comparison

with the remaining negative and ambiguous life events indicated that the stronger relationship exhibited with total life events was maintained with the subset of negative and ambiguous events ($t=3.25$, $p=.001$), with those persons entering love relationships again reporting more events ($\bar{X}=5.50$) than the rest of the sample ($\bar{X}=3.72$).

To examine the possibility that sex or cultural identification of the respondents would influence the overall relationship found between life events and romantic involvements, we performed a log-linear analysis of sex (male vs. female), culture (American vs. Mexican), entering a love relationship (yes vs. no), and number of life events (high vs. low with a median split). This analysis indicated that the only interactions signficantly contributing to the fit of a model were the culture X life-events and love X life-events interactions. Americans are more likely to experience a high number of life events and those entering a love relationship are more likely to experience a high number of life events. Of particular interest is that neither sex nor culture interacting with the life event-love relationship improves the fit of the model.

The results of this analysis of life-event data support the hypothesis that romantic involvement is related to the occurrence of life stressors. Although a causal inference cannot be drawn from the present study, the results are supportive of Walster's emotional attribution model of romantic attraction. The finding that people under stress tend to enter relationships is also consonant with Schachter's (1959) earlier formulation of affiliative needs being aroused by stressful circumstances. Research on need for affiliation has shown strong birth-order effects, and it is tempting to speculate that a strong interaction with birth-order might obtain for the relationship found here. This analysis would have some bearing on the alternative interpretations of our result -- attribution or need for affiliation -- but, unfortunately, a birth-order analysis is not possible with our data.

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